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IN MEMORIAM

V.Y. Mudimbe: On Invention, Odor, and Toxicity*

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Linguistics constituted V.Y. Mudimbe's entry point into the world of scholarship. In Jean-Pierre Bekolo's documentary *Les Choses et les mots de Mudimbe* (2014), Mudimbe remarks that his doctoral dissertation, "Air: étude sémantique" (1970) submitted at the University of Louvain, was a useful exercise for his future academic career because it taught him to become a rigorous scholar. This PhD set out to trace the evolution of the semes "ἀήρ," "aer," and "air" in a large corpus of texts in ancient Greek, Latin, and old and modern French. The investigation was informed by Ferdinand de Saussure and mid-twentieth-century scholarship including figures such as Stephen Ullmann, Louis Hjelmslev, Pierre Guiraud, and Klaus Heger. His supervisors were André Goose, the famous Belgian grammarian and former chair of the "Conseil International de la Langue Française," and Willy Bal, the Walloon dialectologist and noted poet who, in 1962, had also founded the department of romance studies at the University of Lovanium, the Kinshasa-based university established by the University of Louvain when Congo was still under Belgian rule (Monaville 2022, 84–102). In this documentary by Bekolo, Mudimbe adds that this doctorate was completely disconnected from his subsequent studies on knowledge production in and about sub-Saharan Africa.[1] It is true that he would never reconnect with pure linguistics and diachronic semantics. However, the important point to bear in mind is that linguistics—Saussurian linguistics, that is—became, shortly before, but increasingly after the Second World War, *the* analytical grid that would permit the structuralist revolution. Therefore, the young Mudimbe's choice was eminently strategic for he realized that this methodology would allow him to explore from a novel theoretical angle knowledge production in Africa and dismantle the evolutionist tenets that had been employed to subdue Africa since the nineteenth century. In

* This article partly draws on a lecture ("Undisciplined Africanism. Introduction à l'œuvre littéraire et philosophique de VY Mudimbe") that I delivered at the Université Catholique de Louvain on 2 October 2025 as part of UCLouvain "Africa Seminar". I would like to thank Anne-Sophie Gijs, Aurore Vermylen and Marie Deridder for their generous invitation.

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The Invention of Africa, he returns briefly to the heuristic possibilities of this reading grid:

> At the very heart of the nineteenth-century European ambition of interpreting and classifying human cultures according to a scale, one faces history as a theoretical and abstract vocation, which refers to various achievements. To use F. de Saussure's concepts, it is strictly speaking a sort of *langue* whose meaning and power are given and actualized in such *paroles* as biological characteristics of beings, evolution and organization of language, economic structures of social formation, structuration of religious beliefs and practices. These paroles are linked in a relation of necessity to the minds of peoples who have put them forth and, by extension, to their culture as a whole. (Mudimbe 1988, 190)

The dissection of the "langue"—of the discursive matrix—and "paroles" underpinning knowledge in Africa since Antiquity was one of Mudimbe's most notable intellectual achievements (Wai 2024). In essays such as *L'Autre face du royaume* (1973a), *L'Odeur du père* (1982) and *The Invention of Africa*, he systematically analyzed Africa's "gnostic malady" (Masolo 1994, 188), African scholars' inability to escape the methodological entrapment of Western science and to immunize themselves against its toxic *stench.* These three essays form a continuum. They were overwhelmingly concerned with Africa—West, East, Central, and Southern Africa—and the epistemological mechanisms that had since the development of imperial modernity impeded its scholars, intellectuals, and cultural agents from creating original knowledge.

In his four novels, however, Mudimbe provides a more Congo-centered analysis of epistemological alienation in a neocolonial context. Although the name of the country—Congo or Zaire—is not always explicitly mentioned, these texts unfold against the backdrop of post-1960 Congolese history. *Entre les eaux* (1973b) and *Le Bel immonde* (1976) are set in the context of civil wars—and rebellions (see Verhaegen 1966)—that followed the secession of Katanga and South Kasai. *L'Écart* (1979b) takes place in Western Africa but stages the unhappy trajectory of a historian writing a doctoral thesis on precolonial Kuba dynasties. *Shaba Deux* (1989) is set in Lubumbashi in 1978 during the failed attempt on the part of the *gendarmes katangais* (see Kennes and Larmer, 2016) to engineer another Katangese secession. Mudimbe's main protagonists are loosely autobiographical: a priest (*Entre les eaux*), a Franciscan nun (*Shaba Deux*), and an African historian (*L'Écart*). Their common predicament is a sense of alienation and inability to operate as emancipated agents because their actions are determined by concepts and methods defined in the West and for the West. One of the most visible differences between the above-mentioned essays and these novels, then, is that the former deal with Africa in general whereas the latter are more closely related to Mudimbe's Congolese experiential reality as a scholar and former cleric.

In his intellectual autobiography *Les Corps glorieux des mots et des êtres. Esquisse d'un jardin africain à la Bénédictine* (1994), Mudimbe further examines the enduring legacy—and *toxicity*—of colonialism on his own trajectory. He argues here, but

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with examples drawn from his own experiences as a former Congolese Benedictine, that his most habitual behaviors were shaped once and for all during his formative years at the seminary in the 1950s. In *The Invention of Africa*, he had applied an analogous archaeological and Foucault-inspired method in his analysis of three ecclesiastical figures—Giovanni Romano (seventeenth century), Samuel Ajayi Crowther (nineteenth century) and Placide Tempels (twentieth century)—who had worked as missionaries in Africa. Mudimbe concluded that, far from being extraordinary proselytes, each of these men had simply been the "sign" of their respective "episteme" (Mudimbe 1988, 49). In *Les Corps glorieux*, Mudimbe also demonstrates that the monk he used to be simply adopted the norms of the ecclesial order in which he was trained. This process of dressage, he argues, started when he was a child and responded to his teachers with the eagerness of a "gifted little dog" (Mudimbe 1994, 13). This autobiography is therefore also employed as a conduit to evidence the extent to which Mudimbe's own future would also remain affected by the *stench* of colonialism—*L'Odeur du père*—and its *toxic* discourses.

However, *Les Corps glorieux* goes much further than *L'Autre face du royaume*, *L'Odeur du père*, and *The Invention of Africa* for it also touches on the *real* toxicity generated by the mining industrial project in his native Katanga. The Congo Free State (CFS, 1885–1908) and the Belgian Congo (1908–1960), as is well known (see De Boeck and Baloji 2016; Fraiture 2022; 2023; Henriet 2021; Makori 2017; Nest 2011; Nugent 2021; Smith 2022; Vogel 2022; Walker 2014), were large-scale extraction projects. In *Les Corps glorieux* he remembers this context of "slow violence" to refer to the phrase coined by Rob Nixon, the American eco-critic, who, in an eponymous book (2011), explored the delayed and intergenerational effects of industrial toxicity in an African postcolonial context. Mudimbe recalls here his youth in Likasi and Lubumbashi (Katanga). He mentions his father who was throughout his working life employed by the all-powerful and paternalistic Union Minière du Haut Katanga (UMHK), the mining multinational founded by the Belgians at the beginning of the twentieth century. He remembers his early years as a pupil at the UMHK primary school and his father's hope that the young Valentin would eventually become a mining engineer. He deplores the living conditions in the so-called "centres extra-coutumiers," that is, the residential compounds where African workers recruited by mining companies were relocated and constrained to relinquish their traditions. Mudimbe also establishes a causal link between the eradication of local cultures and systems of thought and the geological amputations generated by colonial mining in his native Katanga.

Les Corps glorieux was published well before the debates on the Anthropocene and its more specialized iterations such as the Capitalocene and the plantationocene and yet it announced our coltan-hungry present and the eco-critical anxiety that has haunted Congolese cultural productions since the first decade of the twenty-first century. From colonial times onwards, Congo has always been regarded as a reservoir of strategic resources ranging from ivory, rubber, copper, uranium, cobalt, and diamonds. The Congolese historian Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem notices "curieuses similitudes" (2020, 425) between past resource plunders and the emergence of a new brand of predation generated by the global digital revolution.

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As shown in this article, Mudimbe's epistemological work was key in revealing the "langue" and "paroles" called on to *invent* Africa and divest Africans from their cultures and systems of thought. However, there is also in his work, and in *Les Corps glorieux* in particular, a focus on the connections between epistemic and environmental violence. He intimates here that the all-encompassing extractive regime implemented by the UMHK not only brought about the forced assimilation of Africans but also brutally transformed the Katangese landscape while annihilating vernacular epistemologies.

This idea has been at the heart of the creative work produced by Congolese visual artists and novelists since the early years of this millennium. In his photomontages and films, Sammy Baloji has reappropriated colonial artefacts and archives from the UMHK to interrogate past resource predations and their echoes in contemporary DRC culture (Jewsiewicki 2010). While calling on Mudimbe's intellectual authority (Baloji 2025), his work resonates with that of twenty-first-century novelists—Sinzo Aanza, Fiston Mwanza Mujila, Jean Bofane, Blaise Ndala, and Alexandre Mulongo Finkelstein—who also suggest that the presence of colonial "specters" in contemporary DRC goes a long way to explain environmental disasters, forced human displacements, catastrophic living conditions and the plight of artisan miners ("creuseurs"). These cultural figures, like Mudimbe himself after the independence of Congo, have been at the forefront of an innovative Congo-centered brand of artistic activism. As such they have pursued successful intermedial and curatorial experiments and reinscribed Congolese culture in a globalized system of exchange. This focus on global connections has also been accompanied by a reengagement with traditional genres (e.g. Kasala, lukasa) and Congo's environmentally sustainable epistemologies in which nature is not a thing to be commodified but a "natural person" (Belaïdi et al. 2023; Mbembe 2023).

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Note

1. It was eventually published in 1979a as *Air: Étude sémantique.*

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